

Folk Art and Social Change in Ayodhya: Visual Practices among Rural Marginalized Communities

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Abstract

Rich in biodiversity and useful art resources, Ayodhya is a highly significant place for folk and local art traditions. This paper explores the role of folk art and rural craft traditions of the rural marginalized communities of Ayodhya as active agents of social change. Through visual culture and art historical exploration, it examines how traditional practices such as ritual decoration, terracotta art, traditional murals, clay and wood sculptures, embroidery and weaving and other useful folk arts are being reimagined as a means of resistance and promoting social resilience, especially by men and women from the lower and backward classes. Based on a mixed analysis of fieldwork as well as ethnographic visual analysis, ecological awareness, contextualization of rural identity and caste identity, this paper argues that folk art in contemporary Ayodhya is not merely aesthetic or devotional, but is also a living and evolving resource of political, communal and resistance. These folk art practices challenge collective identity, cultural appropriation as well as dominant legacies and narratives in Ayodhya and offer a counter-archive to state-sponsored religious monumentalism, besides advocating for social justice, marking social change.

Keywords: Folk Art, Social Change, Ayodhya, Communities, traditions

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Introduction: A Brief Overview of the Folk Art Ecosystem of Ayodhya :

Known as a place of folk art traditions, religious sites and Ganga Jamuni Tehzeeb, Ayodhya is viewed through the lens of Ramayana inspired Hindu monumentalism, temple politics, pilgrimage sites and contested history, but above all these historical narratives, there exists a complex web of vibrant folk art practices, which thrive on the caste, marginalized and gender realities of the rural areas of the region, which not only serve as carriers of folk traditions but also as a medium of expression as well as social, economic and political change. The folk art and craft traditions nurtured and conceived by women, lower caste artisans, potters and peasant communities have been less studied despite their presence in the dominant visual culture. The marginalized communities, local artists and artisans of the villages of Ayodhya have long kept their history alive and used local artistic practices to contest dominant elite narratives, claim cultural agency as well as reshape local history. This paper shifts the focus from the grand temples in Ayodhya and its surrounding rural environs to the village folk arts such as local wall painting tradition, terracotta and clay sculpture, carpentry, textile embroidery, Moonj art, basketry and other utility crafts and examines how the rural folk arts of Ayodhya respond to changing social, political and environmental realities, contribute to broader social changes, and resist the grandeur of urbanization that is responsible for the destruction of folk arts. Based on works of art by local artists of Ayodhya Faizabad, interviews and visual documentation, this paper argues that folk art in Ayodhya has become a tool for identity construction, rural studies and social resistance as it adapts to the constantly changing social, political and religious context.

Folk art here, despite being rooted in devotional practices, seasonal rituals and community memories, is a distinctive but under-represented figure in cultural historiography. The folk art of Ayodhya dedicated to folk

deities and local patrons is expressed in ephemeral folk art forms such as Kohbar^a, Manjha decorations during weddings, ritual objects and sculptures made of clay-cow dung or wood, wall painting decorations and Chowk Purna^b. These decorative art elements are placed in various folk arts, which also incorporate caste specific aesthetics, gendered labour and local myths. These are transmitted from generation to generation orally and visually, often preserved by women as a visual heritage of folk art.

Research Questions:

- How do rural and marginalized communities in Ayodhya use folk art for their identity and ritual aesthetics?
- How do these folk arts as visual practices interact with dominant narratives of heritage in a sacred and contested city like Ayodhya?

Methodology:

This research is based on multi-layered ethnographic fieldwork in present-day Ayodhya, engaging with potters, women artists, artisans and Dalit artists in the surrounding villages such as Sohawal, Bikapur, Halwara ka Purwa. This research analyses local art forms through subaltern visibility, feminist art history, material culture and postcolonial lenses, integrating lower class studies and rural sociology with art history.

Ayodhya's Folk Art Ecology: A Brief Overview

Ayodhya's rural folk practices have remained at the margins of the 'official' iconography amid the broader temple-mosque debates, either ignored or omitted from mainstream historiography. These arts are deeply embedded in caste labour temple economies, seasonal rituals and agrarian life, serving as a centre of a rural aesthetic and caste negotiation. The toys, utility crafts and sculptures sold in the rural markets are produced by local lower caste artisans such as potters and other lower caste communities traditionally considered Shudra or backward. Seasonal works such as embroidery, decoration on cloth are mostly done by Muslim women, but are neglected. Local artisans and potters report that their contribution to mainstream tourism economies, arts and temple construction is a little recognized dimension, or is rarely acknowledged. One artisan said, '*Hum Ram banaate hain par mandir me humara naam nahi liya hai*', which makes it clear that these artists are not given the importance they deserve. In the folk sculptures made by these folk artists, Rama or Sita are often depicted with local characteristics, costumes and motifs, which indicate the local embodiment of divinity rooted in rural labour, caste experience. These artistic works, while imbued with devotion, challenge the authority of the upper castes. As a form of gender expression and creative labour, women create quilts, embroidery and seasonal rituals like Kohbar, Chauk Poorna on walls, often for practices performed during birth and marriage. Wall paintings imbued with religious imagery were also painted with natural ochre and cow dung colours, which brought the epics to the ground through social values and local visual language, but in today's era, state-sponsored monumentalisation and beautification, have limited the scope of folk art.



^a Kohbar art is a traditional form of painting from the Ayodhya region Uttar Pradesh, Mithila region of Bihar, India, primarily created during weddings to bless the nuptial chamber. It's a ritualistic art form where the walls, paper, or fabric of the Kohbar Ghar are decorated with symbolic motifs. These paintings feature elements like lotus leaves, Shiva-Parvati, Radha-Krishna, and various animals and plants, each carrying specific auspicious meanings related to fertility, prosperity, and the union of the couple.

^b Chowk Poorana, also known as Chowkpurana, is a traditional Indian folk art form, primarily practiced in the northern Uttar Pradesh. It involves decorating floors and walls with intricate designs using rice flour, colored powders, and other natural materials. This art form is deeply rooted in cultural and religious traditions, often created during festivals and auspicious occasions.

Moonj^c products are a popular handicraft of Sultanpur Ayodhya. Moonj is a type of grass that is native to the region and is used to make a variety of products, such as baskets, mats, and bags. The process of making these products involves weaving the moonj strands together to create intricate patterns and designs. The products are known for their durability and are widely used for household and storage purposes.^d



Mauni or Sikhuli

Decorative 'mauni' and 'daliya' made from stems of sirki and sarkanda grass are widely made by the villagers of Ayodhya, on which decorative ornaments of 'sugga suggi', 'peacock' and flower leaves are made. Munja grain cleaning 'soop' is often made by people of lower castes or Muslim communities, which depends on local characteristics and climate. On these moonja 'soup'(sieve), ornaments of geometric patterns like flowers, leaves or animals are made from colorful moonja. Villagers often make hand decorative 'pankha' or 'bena' from moonja, sarkanda or cloth to provide air and to avoid heat, in which glimpses of Awadhi folk motifs are visible. Earlier people used to give five items to the groom in the 'achradharai' tradition in the marriage, which included sikhula, kanghi, seesa, bena, and mauni, these traditions, which had preserved the history of folk life, are disappearing with time. Baskets of bamboo flasks for 'lava parchhane'^e, traditional 'peedha' for the bride and groom to sit during the wedding were made by the carpenter community, which were decorated with colorful lotus petals and auspicious symbols. Apart from this, a small wooden plough, sindoordan, a pair of wooden 'sugga suggi'^f were given as gifts to the newly married couples. Apart from this, cots made of cotton rope decorated with geometric patterns show the glimpse of local carpentry.



^c Moonj grass, also known as *Saccharum munja*, is a wild grass native to the Indian subcontinent, particularly in regions like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. It's known for its long, sturdy, and flexible fibers, making it a popular material for traditional crafts like basket weaving.

^d (India.gov.in National portal of India, 2025)

^e The ritual of pouring "lava" (rice cakes) at the wedding is an important Hindu wedding ritual, especially in Awadh rural area. This ritual symbolizes the happiness, prosperity and devotion of the bride and groom to each other in their married life.

^f The wooden "Sugga" and "Suggi" (or "Sogaila") used in weddings are part of a ritual that is performed after the Kanyadan. The "Sugga" and "Suggi" are parrots made of wood that are decorated in the wedding mandap. They are considered to be symbols of the bride's parents, and it is customary for the groom's side to carry them with them while shaking the mandap.

Widely available along the banks of the rivers, the free and wild grass – **Moonj** is harvested in the months of **October and November**. Women weave and compose baskets for their household utility and also to form a part of a bride's trousseau. This is largely carried out as a **secondary occupation to agriculture in Uttar Pradesh**. These **eco-friendly products** can be used as containers for dry storage, food storage devices, for making carry bags and wall decorators.⁹



Moonja Rangna



Chowk Poorna



Kadhai (embroidery)



Sugga-Suggi



Ookhal

The local folk art items used during the wedding ceremony are a symbol of beauty and auspiciousness, which testify to the transmission of knowledge of tradition and respect for natural resources and show that even in the changing environment, cultural continuity can be preserved by incorporating modernity in cultural expression. The picture of Kohbar made outside the room of the newly married couple has a special significance, which is a symbol of good wishes and love. The marriage ceremony, good luck and transmission of local life philosophy are

⁹ (Joshi, 2022)

represented by the inclusion of various local symbols such as lotus flower, peepal tree, sun moon, fish, swan pair, animals and birds, etc.



Hal (plough)



Kohbar



Lava Parchan



Measures to Preserve the Folk Arts of Ayodhya

Due to changing climate and urbanization, the aesthetics of these local folk arts are being eroded, which has increased the risk of their extinction. The use and trend of fiber casting idols is increasing in Ayodhya, replacing the works of local artisans and artists, due to which ecological concerns and folk art practices are being threatened to be marginalized. Beautification of river banks, road widening and construction of temple corridors have led to ecological disruptions here, which include deforestation for urbanization, pollution of Saryu, disappearance of natural resources and displacement of settlements of artisans and potters. Still, the folk artists here respond to these changes through their imagination by creating art from local vegetation found on the river banks such as

Moonj, Sikki^h, Narkat, Kaasⁱ etc. or ochre and khadiya, the soil suitable for terracotta from local ponds. Programs like Deepotsav have provided a new way for local Kumbhakars to earn their livelihood. However, there are concerns about appropriation of local folk motifs by commercial designers in Ayodhya, especially through the mass production of images of Ram and temple souvenirs, leading to exploitation, labour and digital literacy issues.

Conclusion: Ayodhya's Rural Art as Archive and Assertion

This article seeks to shift the focus from the city of gods to the art of lower class women artists, artisans, potters and local marginalized communities as folk evidence by establishing the rural folk art of Ayodhya as a record and assertion. Their folk art tradition as a vibrant rural politics is based on caste conflict, everyday life, ecological attachment and gender based alternative visualization and creativity even in the era of construction of Hindu national monument. The preservation of these arts is extremely important, and there is an urgent need to establish local rural folk art institutions to transfer them from generation to generation, so that they can transfer their history, and make people aware through their art.

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^h Sikki grass is a type of reed grass, scientifically known as *Chrysopogon zizanioides*, prized for its golden luster when dried. It's primarily found in the marshy areas of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, India, and the Terai region of Nepal. The grass is harvested for its stem, which is then used to create various handicrafts, and its roots, which are used to extract oil for perfumery and medicinal purposes.

ⁱ Kaas grass" refers to *Saccharum spontaneum*, also known as Kans grass, Thatch grass, Wild Sugarcane, or Nannana. It is a perennial grass native to the Indian subcontinent, known for its white-topped appearance and role in indicating the arrival of autumn.